

Signs and Meaning in the Cinema

Sam Robdie

The existential value of the work of art, as a declaration about being, cannot be extracted from the adherent signals alone (its symbolism), nor from the self-signals alone (the medium). The self-signals taken alone prove only existence; adherent signals taken in isolation prove only the presence of meaning . . .

Recent movements in artistic practice stress self-signals alone, as in abstract expressionism; conversely, recent art scholarship has stressed adherent signals alone, as in iconography . . .

George Kubler (1962)¹

Movies can be located on a scale, abstract expressionism to absolute naturalism. The one, composed of self-signals alone, has as subject the medium itself. The other stresses content above form, technique only as a means—adherent signals predominate. Hollywood movies come near to this end of the scale, one reason for traditional contempt—‘. . . the misguided efforts of the present-day film which imitates more or less successfully the pictorial composition of the old easel painting, its monocular vision and its picturesque settings.’ (Moholy-Nagy, 1965)²

Moholy-Nagy held an extreme view, though one still worth recalling . . .

‘Like all other means of expression, the film with its characteristic visual, perceptual elements appeals directly to the senses. This is the basic departure of abstract motion pictures. The development of the category of film will increase in importance if the means are found necessary for its appeal. The same is true of the direct psychophysical response to color without any naturalistic theme. It is safe to predict for the film an increasing use of pure colors as in non-objective paintings. The recognition of this trend and its possibilities is essential if we are to find a healthy escape from the present deluge of trashy colored motion pictures.’

Any defence of the Hollywood movie in this context would stress necessarily a contrary naturalist aesthetic as *the* aesthetic of the cinema. It would be forced as well, as against ‘pure’ film, to attend to ‘meaning’ in thematic and narrative elements.

Post-war France, liberated by the Americans, where love of American films and the resistance became closely linked, provided the first

¹ George Kubler. 1962. *The Shape of Time*. Yale.

² L. Moholy-Nagy. 1965. *Vision in Motion*. New York.

serious sympathetic consideration of Hollywood movies in the figure of André Bazin and the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Bazin and *Cahiers* formulated a suitable naturalist aesthetic and a theory which regarded Hollywood movies as works of individual directors, *auteurs*, writing, as it were, in film. The literary associations suggested in the very formula were significant—certain ‘literary’ thematic preoccupations of various directors were used as a key for making distinctions between them, as a primary tool for critical understanding.

Peter Wollen’s *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*,³ though critical of aspects of the *auteur* theory and the implications of a purely naturalist cinema aesthetic, is within this *Cahiers* tradition, and the book is perhaps the best example of it in this country.

Wollen has provided in the past often brilliant thematic analyses of Budd Boetticher, John Ford, Sam Fuller, Howard Hawks, Roberto Rossellini, Josef von Sternberg.⁴ But the analyses, however acute, lacked any coherent theoretical frame. The apparent need for theory, and his concern with themes, seems to have led naturally to a consideration of disciplines centring on the notion of messages, communication, and the nature of signs—anthropology, cybernetics, linguistics, semiology. *Signs and Meaning* is an attempt to distinguish critically these various grids and to apply them to the movies.

Wollen quotes Lévi-Strauss often, with evident approval, in justification of his own interests. ‘...myth functions “on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically in ‘taking off’ from the linguistic ground on which it keeps rolling.” *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true of the *auteur* film.’

Wollen is here explaining the reason for his own preoccupation with the themes of directors and suggesting that the meaning of such themes might best be analysed by the methods of structural anthropology. But the association, movie-myth, needs to be examined, not simply assumed, particularly when used to ignore ‘linguistic’ elements peculiar to the cinema—composition, lighting, editing, music, staging, camera work, colour, etc. Lévi-Strauss has had to make a virtue of an ethnographic deficiency—no similar deficiency exists for the movies.

It is on the basis of methods borrowed from structural anthropology that Wollen distinguishes between directors and discovers the basis for a ranked Hollywood pantheon. He employs a structuralist decoding device—oppositional sets, binary bundles seen in relational patterns of transformation—to delineate the thematic preoccupations of John Ford and of Howard Hawks, and concludes: ‘Ford’s work is much richer than that of Hawks and . . . this is revealed by a structural analysis; it is the richness of the shifting relations between antinomies in Ford’s work that makes him a great artist, beyond being an undoubted *auteur*.’

Ford may well be artist and *auteur*, but the assertion is not proven by any

³ Secker & Warburg/British Film Institute, 1968.

⁴ See NLR Nos. 32, 29, 23, 24, 42 and 36 respectively.

demonstration of a shifting set of oppositions on the level of content banalities. There is nothing in Wollen's argument specific to the medium of the movies or the way in which Ford and Hawks handle that medium. Had they been literally authors their novels would have revealed the same binary bundles, the same cracker-barrel philosophic interests. Ford the thinker, has been presented, but not Ford the movie-maker.

Any film director will deal with certain set ideas, themes, motifs, often develop and enlarge these, but not all directors are equally good, nor are the films of individual directors equally good. Themes in themselves may help to distinguish between directors but need not necessarily make these directors distinguished. Yet, it is on the level of theme *alone*, the complexity of ideas, that Wollen ranks and judges directors.

The point being made here might be clarified by a brief glance at the movies of Nicholas Ray. Ray is obsessed with worlds within worlds, their boundaries, their separation, their non-communication—the under-world in the normal world; women in a male world; adolescents among adults; more abstractly, innocence caught in violence. His images are hospitals, prisons, ships, shacks, waiting rooms, deserted houses, cellars, planetariums—rooms within rooms, closed, narrow, enclosed worlds. Other images are of drawers, water glasses, doors, the interior space of cars—receptacles or passages, entrances between closed spaces. These worlds are linked by messages sent through messengers and pages or by telephones, the radio, the newspaper, microphones, loudspeakers, telegrams. Yet, in each instance institutional means of communication result in non-communication—muddled, distorted, misunderstood messages. These elements set off Ray's interests, preoccupations, thematic ideas, are part of his 'signature', but they do not alone make him a profound, or even very interesting film director.

Ray's lighting, colour, editing is perhaps more distinctive than his themes, certainly more peculiar to the movie medium. He uses lighting, particularly for interiors, in a wierd, almost surrealist manner, so that objects and people are made to stand out, a bit too much, as if slightly out of their world and surroundings. He chooses actors for roles not quite suitable for them so that they 'stick out' as he places them in situations not quite believable, slightly out-of-joint. It is possible to get involved in Ray's movies but as objects 'out there', lacking the immediacy of, say, Ford and the corresponding emotional response Ford can elicit. In a Ford movie things are always properly in context, but Ray makes everything jump out, slightly awry, draws attention to objects and faces by a slow-moving, analytic camera so that things are seen for the first time, in every aspect, rather too completely—the very texture of skin, material, hair can be felt.

Ray succeeds, cinematically, in separating the audience from the screen while keeping them involved. He uses the medium, as he uses the radio, telephone, newspaper in his movies, as something which isolates people, which confines them, which only ostensibly is a means for communication.

If structuralism is *the* key to cinematic understanding it needs to be used on various levels specific to the medium, and not on the simple, superficial level of theme alone. Wollen's assertions about Ford and about structuralism need to be tested by using the method to perceive 'shifting relations between antinomies' on the level of sound and image, the composition of images, the rhythm of editing, the relation of shots, of sequences, the use of colour, the choice of stars.

Following Andrew Sarris, Wollen has the 'cultural audacity to establish a pantheon for film directors' of American movies. In the high temple reside Chaplin, Ford, Fuller, Hawks, Hitchcock, Lang, Lubitsch, Ophuls, Sternberg, Welles. I do not quibble with Wollen's favourites, but only point out that they are *his* favourites and seem to be placed there for no critical reason, without any theoretical justification, save Wollen's personal taste and sensitivity.

That Wollen bothered at all is more than 'cultural audacity', indeed, the subjectivism it exhibits is at one with his entire method and 'theoretical' loyalties.

The *politique des auteurs* at its worst became a riotous archaeology—new directors were discovered each day. But there was a certain logic involved. The task of *Cahiers* was to oppose the view that all American films were more or less alike, not to be taken seriously, by pointing out that in fact American films were not all alike, were made by individual *auteurs* and had considerable merit. But once the task of distinguishing directors was made, other more aesthetic criteria had to be introduced to distinguish good from bad directors. Such criteria had to be on elements peculiar to the cinema, not simply on the basis of thematic preoccupations. For if one remains at the level of thematic preoccupations *the only* critical tool left is one's own subjective taste.

The object of communications theory is to reduce messages to their simplest and most economic terms in order efficiently to convey them, to convert them to a form easily transferred to the hardware of computers, telecommunications. The theory is a recognition of a natural universal tendency towards chaos, disruption, noise, and an attempt to control such entropy in order to maintain the minimal necessary structure of messages to ensure communication. The theory might contain aesthetic implications, but is itself a *conservative* framework centring on control, reduction, efficiency, economy. It has been fruitful, particularly for music, but less in application than for its insight into the probabilist structure of messages, the impossibility of total control, the presence of random elements. What communications theory has fought against, certain of the arts have emphasized.

The attempt to decode or perceive artistic productions in terms of a computer-like binary system is more an exercise of control, reduction, impoverishment than it is an understanding of the aesthetic work. Art does involve the cultural ordering of nature but proceeds by a de-differentiation of order. Modern art particularly seeks to introduce, or at least not inhibit, the presence of random, uncontrolled elements.

Structural linguistics, and the anthropology derived from it, concentrate on the most stable, ordered, structured human inventions—myth and language. Language, because it is the primary means of social communication, changes at a fixed and ordered rate which can be precisely defined and predicted. Communications theory is an artificial attempt to do for messages what language already naturally does—reduce noise and impose order.

Wollen, ‘in theory’, recognizes the inadequacy of such reductive grids for the movies, but, ‘in practice’, he uses them—one reason why his theoretical section on semiology fails to result in any cinematic analytic concepts.

Semiology, in its concern with the relation nature—culture for the construction of messages, is necessarily an aesthetic theory. Wollen points out the connection—how any particular semiotic determines one’s aesthetic. And he criticises, rightly, the one-sided ‘naturalist’ aesthetic of Bazin and Metz when applied to the cinema, and the equally one-sided aesthetic based on the arbitrary symbolic nature of the sign, derived from the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure.

But the result of this critique of theories is no theory at all, at least none applicable with any kind of precision to the movies. The aesthetic richness of the cinema springs from the fact that it comprises all three dimensions of the sign: indexical, iconic and symbolic. ‘The great weakness of almost all those who have written about the cinema is that they have taken one of these dimensions, made it the ground of their aesthetic, the “essential” dimension of the cinematic sign, and discarded the rest. This is to impoverish the cinema.’

What is left is an implied eulogy to Jean-Luc Godard because of his cinematic eclecticism, *because* his movies include happily all three dimensions of Charles Pierce’s morphology of the sign. And ‘in practice’ what remains is Wollen’s application of a structuralist grid to the themes of *auteurs*—an impoverishment of the movies, and of the theory.

Comment

Ben Brewster

Sam Rohdie’s review of *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* makes a number of telling and important criticisms, but I should like to append this comment since it seems to me that on one simple point he has missed the author’s intention, and, more seriously, in certain respects he has failed to grasp the main themes that underlie the book.

First, the simple point; Sam Rohdie completely misunderstands the function of the Pantheon of directors at the end of the book, and the general attitude assumed in the book to evaluative critical judgements.